LET IT SHINE
JUNE 27, 2010

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Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20
Luke 10:1-11
Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the light of the world…Let your light shine." Matthew 5:14, 16 (NRSV)

Come, O God, as light in the darkness, to illumine and inspire and warm our hearts. Come as salt to give flavor to our lives. Come as love to bless us with grace, and to call us to be your people in the world you love so dearly: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"You are the light of the world – let your light shine." I love that image. It always takes me back to childhood and the little song we learned in Sunday School

This Little Light of Mine
I'm gonna let it shine…
Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine.

It conjures up a favorite picture: the churches of Leipzig, then in East Germany, in 1989, particularly the beautiful huge Thomas Kirchner, where J.S. Bach was once employed.

After World War II, a powerful and brutal Communist regime ruled East Germany. Berlin itself was divided by a wall into East and West sections.

The Marxist government was officially atheist, dismissed the churches and religion as useless relics of the past.

Churches were allowed to remain open and conduct worship services – but do little else. The government wasn't concerned about private religion. It was concerned when religion went public, when people started talking about economics and war, freedom and justice. And it exerted its control by mandating that young people who were confirmed church members could not attend university. It was very effective.

In the late 1980s demonstrations began to happen, advocating for freedom. Many began in the churches.

The demonstrations grew and grew and the regime became concerned. Troops were called in. The churches continued to fill every Monday night. The program was simple. The beatitudes were read, candles were distributed and lighted.

On October 8th, 70,000 gathered in Leipzig churches. They streamed out of Thomas Kirche, holding candles, singing hymns, filled the city streets. The troops surrounded them, but did not fire on their countrymen.

A week later the Communist Government resigned and the wall came down.

That's letting your light shine – light in the darkness.

And of course, the gorgeous picture of this place on Christmas Eve, which the ministers get to see because we're up here, of the sanctuary slowly filling with the light of a thousand candles and each individual face softly illuminated by candlelight, as we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" before going out into the December night with the light of hope burning brightly in our hearts.

On the same morning I was thinking about this text and the image of the church itself as a light in the darkness, I opened the newspaper and there was a picture of a bus with a sign plastered on the side urging Chicagoans to skip church and sleep in on Sunday morning. It was quite a comedown. The article explained that the signs which will appear on 75 CTA buses, and interior signs on 200 more buses, are the work of The Freedom From Religion Foundation whose spokesperson, Dan Barker said, "obviously there are many reasons to reject religion, most of them intellectual… But, face it, one of the immediate benefits of quitting church, besides getting a 10%

raise because you can stop tithing, is getting to sleep in on Sundays! What the world really needs is a good night's sleep."

Now, besides jolting me back to reality from my vision of all those wonderful little candles in church, I found myself amused by Mr. Barker's naiveté about tithing, about the Judeo-Christian tradition of giving 10% of earnings to the church. He really doesn't know much at all about church. I wish what he assumes about what people who go to church actually give were true, but sadly it isn't: not even close.

The counterpoint – the two texts – "you are the light of the world, let your light shine" and "skip church – stay home and sleep in" gave me a way into this sermon which is about church – with a capital C, and this church, in particular, The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. And it was a helpful reminder that on Sunday morning millions of people, maybe 1500-2000 where I am privileged to work ignore the bus sign advice and do something truly counter culture: get out of bed on Sunday morning, and find their way to church to see what's going on. You're here – instead of sleeping in - thank you very much! So let's think about it – you being in church, what it means.

And let's begin at the beginning, in the year 30 of the Common Era, in the Roman province of Palestine, when Jesus of Nazareth sits down in the middle of his followers, his disciples, to tell them what following his is about: Orientation to Discipleship 101.

He begins with a series of blessing. The blessings the Leipzig Christians read together as their first act of protest against the government. We know them as the Beatitudes.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." There are nine of them. "Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, Blessed are the persecuted, Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you…"

I've always imagined someone interrupting him at that point, probably Peter, who always has something to say, interrupting: "Whoa. Hold it right there. The poor in spirit – blessed? The meek and merciful? The peacemakers? Have you seen a cohort of Roman soldiers recently? They're

the peacemakers around here. Blessed are the pure in heart? You ever hear about graft in high places? Not in this world."

"Unless, maybe you want us in it to pay attention to the world, to withdraw from the world. Maybe you want us to form a seperate community, stick together, maybe build a settlement, a compound like the Essenes did down in the desert, South of Jerusalem, where they could live together and do pretty much what they wanted out of sight and out of mind, and share everything and love and forgive and live in peace undisturbed and untouched by the messiness, complexity, violence in the world.

And it was exactly at that point, when they were beginning to wonder how and where they were supposed to put these statements to work that Jesus said,

> "You are the salt of the earth
> You are the light in the world – a city
> built on a hill cannot be hid. A lamp
> shines in the darkness. You don't put it under a basket – Let
> your light shine"

Whatever Jesus had in mind here, the place he wanted it to happen is the world, human society with all its economic, political and social and interpersonal and commercial complexity and down right messiness and sometimes outright tragedy and evil. Do not hide this. Do not allow me to be irrelevant. You have it in you to be the salt of the earth. If you are with me and I am in you – you can be – you are the light of the world – let your light shine.

Powerful, intriguing, world changing images, both act dramatically on their environment. Salt seasons, brings out flavor. Light pushes back the darkness. In fact, the deeper the darkness, the more dramatic and visible the light –even of one small candle.

His followers, his church is to be salt of the earth, a light in the world, a light in the darkness. It's not easy to do that. It's complicated and tough and expensive and sometimes even dangerous. And so, in every age, his people have been tempted to withdraw from the world, to develop a life style and vocabulary and behavior that is intentionally "other worldly". But at their better moments, they have been reminded of these powerful images

of salt and light and that their mission is to be in the world. There have always been voices urging his people not to get their hands dirty in worldly matters. "Stay inside the church. Religion is a personal matter between God and me. It certainly isn't social or economic or political." And there have been great moments when one of his followers remembered where he told his people to be; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The church's job, our job description, is to be salt to the earth, light in darkness, to be the light of God's love shining brightly.

Stay with me as we narrow the focus again, to this church, in this place.

Later this morning members of this congregation will have their first look at a plan for the future. If you are not from here, and are a visitor this morning, forgive me for imposing our family business on you. The plan is bold and brave and it will require us to stretch our imaginations and our resources. That's not particularly new. We have a history of meeting big challenges. This congregation was formed in 1871 out of a merger of two others – North Presbyterian Church on the corner of Grand and Wabash, Westminster. They chose the name "Fourth Presbyterian" because there already was a 1st, 2nd, 3rd and, in fact, a 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th Presbyterian Church – but, for some reason, no Fourth Church. 19th century Presbyterians apparently didn't have much imagination when it came to church names and it has left us the not unpleasant duty to explain it, no it's not Fourth Avenue and no we're not the fourth largest... The new congregation and its pastor, David Swing, chose the old North Church Building, closed it for expansion and renovation during the summer of 1871 and looked forward to a grand opening and new beginning on Sunday, October 8th. It was a marvelous day with celebrations in the morning, afternoon and evening. And that very night Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern. Before the fire burned itself out 18,000 buildings were destroyed, including the new Fourth Presbyterian Church. All but five of the congregation's 130 families lost their homes.

As the fire approached, Elder Samuel Howe, who stored the Church's silver communion ware in his home for safekeeping, took it to the lake shore and buried it in the sand, along with his family's silver. After the fire he returned to recover it and discovered that it had been stolen. Months later someone rang Howe's doorbell at midnight and left a basket with the silver

communion ware and a note explaining that during confession a priest insisted that the communion ware be returned to its owner. We use that chalice, with its amazing Chicago history every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Two weeks after the fire, members of the church met in Plymouth Congregational Church to plan to build a new church on the corner of Rush and Superior. They borrowed the money - $25,000 at 9% interest. The new Fourth Presbyterian Church opened on January 4, 1874. It seated 1,200 and cost $80,000.

The congregation grew and in 1908 invited a distinguished Baltimore minister and popular preacher, John Timothy Stone, to become its pastor. Stone turned the committee down, telling them they needed to put themselves to "a larger work and a new and better equipped edifice." Undeterred, church leaders met in the offices of the First National Bank two days before Christmas, and called a meeting of the congregation for December 27th 1908 to raise the money for a new church – Cyrus McCormick Jr. stood up and said his family would give $1 for every $2 members pledged and personally traveled to Baltimore with pledges for $100,000 to build a new church. This time Stone agreed to come.

They heeded their new minister's advice to "attempt great things for God: accomplish great things for God" and decided to build the most extraordinary church building west of New York City before they had raised all the money. They purchased the property on Pine Street, a sandy road on the lake shore. Some members objected because it was so remote from the central city. That remote sandy road became Michigan Avenue.

They instructed the architects to design a magnificent sanctuary, which they did, and a Sunday School wing – which is the adjacent building housing Anderson Hall today, a Manse for the minister and then the unique, defining structure, a "Club Building" along Chestnut Street.

They knew what they wanted: an inspiring worship space that would invite the world in and lift eyes and spirits. And they wanted a building to serve the world, to be salt, light, in the lives of thousands of single working people, many new to the city, who lived in the rooming houses in the neighborhood. The Club Building was designed to house a Men's Club and a Young Woman's Club – to be a "Home away from Home" for all those

young adults in the neighborhood. There were separate entrances, which are still there along Chestnut: the woman's club entrance is the one nearest Michigan Avenue. For $2 per year club rooms were available where a man, in the words of the original announcement "might sit in a Morris chair, before an open fire, beneath an imposing pair of antlers and read a book from the club library or listen to the player piano or to the Edison Diamond point machine." There was a writing room, game room for pool and shuffleboard, a music room and a gymnasium on the second floor shared with the women.

The Women's Club provided a parlour where gentlemen friends could be entertained, with a chaperone, a fireplace, both fireplaces are in the current Randolph Room, piano, bookshelves, kitchen, sewing room. Annual dues were $1. The basement of the Club Building was to house a bowling alley but plans were changed to provide Boys and Girls clubs, which were a huge success. Living quarters were also provided for a full time Director of Clubs were located where our Social Service Center is today.

Salt and Light is in the DNA of this church in its commitment to ministry in the world, the needs of which continue to change and are very different 100 years later. Today the building houses education programs for all ages, tutoring for 400 urban children weekly, Social Service Center, Centers for Whole Health, Life and Learning, Counseling Center and a day school.

100 years ago Fourth Presbyterian Church built facilities to serve the world. That world did not contain many families with children. Ours does. Our average age is much lower than the average mainline church. There are plenty of young adults and many families with children deciding to live downtown. We have ten-twelve-fifteen infant baptisms every month. We do not have space for them all. And so we are planning in 2010 – just as our predecessors were doing in 1910 a building to meet the new challenges of a new time, our time.

"This Little Light of Mine, I'm Gonna Let it Shine." I used to sing and wonder what exactly it meant. I wasn't sure what my little light was, or if I even had one. In time I discovered that I do have a light. In fact everyone has a light, a gift, a skill. Your light is your commitment to your profession – to the law, justice, healing, teaching, education, your light is your devotion to music, art, beauty, your light is your impatience with injustice and violence, your light is love for our country, the world, your children,

grandchildren, all the children. Everyone has a heart and soul, time and energy and intelligence and passion and every one of us is called by our Lord Jesus – to let it shine brightly, to never put it under a bushel basket. If Jesus walked in here this morning and saw it all – these people, with their gifts, with their resources, with all their intelligence and good will and hopefulness – I know he'd say – "There is a lot of light in this place – Don't hide it. Let it shine."

The light, we believe, shines in the darkness. "I am the light of the world," Jesus said. This little light of mine – when I combine it with your light, and you add it to others, when we all – all of us, striving to be faithful and honest followers of Jesus, let our individual lights shine, it becomes a big, beautiful, bright light, a light in the city, the Light of the world, our Lord called it.

So, let it shine…
let it shine,
let your light shine!

Amen.